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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2247
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SUBJECT: ANKARA MEDIA REACTION REPORT

FRIDAY, APRIL 20, 2007

In Today's Papers

Malatya Murders

All papers report ten suspects have been taken into custody in connection with the killing of three Christians at a Bible publishing firm in Malatya on Wednesday. Cumhuriyet says police are investigating ties between the murderers and nationalist/Islamist groups, especially those in Trabzon, the scene of a Catholic priest's murder last year and home of several suspects in the Hrant Dink assassination case. Several dailies report that before the killings occurred, local newspapers stoked tensions with reports pointing to an alarming increase in missionary activities in the city.

President Sezer "denounced in the strongest terms" the murders in Malatya, saying the massacre could not be justified in any way. Prime Minister Erdogan said "Using violence in the name of religion cannot have a religious, humanitarian or legal explanation. Any kind of fanaticism and intolerance is the enemy of democracy." Ihsan Ozbek, the head of Turkish Salvation Church organization, has condemned the killings, saying there was a "medieval witch hunt" for missionaries in Turkey.

Mainstream or Islamist-oriented, most papers underline the "culture of intolerance" prevailing in Turkey. Quoting from the 2005 State Department report on Religious Freedom, the 2006 US Human Rights Report and the 2006 EU Progress Report on Turkey, Milliyet reports that "for two years, the US and EU have been warning Turkey in these reports about the threats against non-Muslims as well as the negative attitude toward missionary activities." "Who will be the next target of paranoid attacks against non-Muslims?" asks mainstream Milliyet columnist Taha Akyol. Liberal Radikal says both leftist and rightist groups are alarmed at missionary activities in Turkey despite the reality that over the past seven years, only 344 people out of a total population of 74 million have converted to Christianity and the total number of missionaries is 50, according to Turkish Interior Ministry data.

Commentary on the Malatya Killings

In a page one editorial mainstream Milliyet says: "Taliban-like methods are repeated in a country in the process of becoming an EU member -- this is the very time to come face to face with our reality. Before investigating the Malatya murders, we should admit the existence of a mentality in this country which feeds on bigotry, intolerance and xenophobia. Missionary activities are still considered to be negative by a significant number of people and the issue is misused by some politicians. Turkey's secular character, if that is real, requires that our Christian citizens be able to live and disseminate their faith as freely as others. Let's hope that the terrible murder will bring awareness of intolerance and will pave the way for correcting it."

Ali Sirmen comments in the leftist-nationalist daily Cumhuriyet:

"The murderers of Malatya are clearly 'made in Turkey' because of their feelings of hate, xenophobia, and discrimination based on race and religion. The Minister of Interior must feel very ashamed for not preventing the development of such a climate. Those who are responsible for this environment, calling for hate crimes, must feel responsible and very ashamed. Unfortunately, I don't believe that they do."

Yasin Dogan comments in the Islamist-intellectual Yeni Safak: "There is nothing wrong with being religious or being nationalist. But it is very wrong that there are tendencies and provocations leading to authoritarianism and fascism."

Speculation on Presidential Nominations

All papers continue speculation on various names to be nominated as presidential candidates, including Foreign Minister Gul, Defense Minister Vecdi Gonul or deputy Prime Minister Abdullatif Sener.

ANKARA 00000943 002 OF 002

Prime Minister Erdogan told the press yesterday his candidate for president will "surprise everyone." Vatan and Cumhuriyet claim Erdogan has in mind a woman, State Minister Nimet Cubukcu, for the post. Mainstream papers also expect Parliament Speaker Bulent Arinc to run if Erdogan and Gul do not.

Ambassador Satterfield Visits Ankara

Cumhuriyet, Radikal, and Yeni Safak report Ambassador Satterfield, senior Iraq Coordinator, will be in Ankara on Friday for talks with Turkish Foreign Ministry (MFA) and Turkish General Staff (TGS) on topics that include the upcoming Iraqi neighbors conference in Egypt, Iraq, and the fight against terror.

France Sends 'Terror Delegation' to Turkey

Milliyet, Cumhuriyet and Zaman report a French delegation of terrorism experts, judges, prosecutors and police officers held meetings in Ankara, Istanbul and Diyarbakir to discuss the activities of the PKK and leftist-terrorist groups, including DHKP-C, in Turkey. Zaman comments the delegation came to ease Turkish reactions to the release of the PKK members detained in operations in France earlier this year.

TV Highlights

NTV (6 a.m.)

Domestic News

- General Yasar Buyukanit, chief of the Turkish General Staff, has dismissed speculation that he was going to issue new messages with regard to the developments in Turkey during a visit to Ataturk's house in Thessaloniki. "I do not need to go to Greece to issue any messages," he said.

- Turkish Union of Chambers (TOBB) President Rifat Hisarciklioglu said following the election of a president in May, Turkey should hold early parliamentary elections in July.

- A court in Diyarbakir has suspended the trial procedure of Mayor Osman Baydemir because it was initiated without obtaining the necessary permission from the Interior Ministry.

- The IMF said Turkey will become world's 17th biggest economy in 2007.

International News

- EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn has welcomed the new roadmap for reforms made public by the Turkish government earlier this week.

- Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian said Yerevan will insist on the opening of the Turkey-Armenia border.

- Israeli Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer has rejected charges that his country supports the independence aspirations of Iraqi Kurds.

- President Bush has unveiled a new package of sanctions against Sudan for failing to cooperate with the international efforts to end the crisis in Darfur.

WILSON